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ABSTRACT

The ecosystem approach to environmental assessment of college residence halls asks students to identify issues they feel strongly about, and to recommend action the university might take to enhance or rectify a situation. This approach was used to examine life in the undergraduate residence halls at Indiana University. A forced-choice questionnaire assessing students' perceptions of residence hall programs, staff responsiveness to student needs, student government, printed matter and information, study conditions and order, and food service, was completed by 785 dormitory residents. Respondents had the opportunity to go back through the questionnaire and identify items they felt strongly about (positively or negatively) and indicate how these situations could be enhanced or changed. Residence hall programs and residence hall staff were evaluated very positively. Students approved of available services and felt they had an opportunity to participate in student government. They indicated they have adequate information and that publications meet their needs. They reported study conditions in the dormitories needed improvement. Responses to the new universal meal ticket program were positive. Comparison of results of previous studies of residence hall life from 1978-1983 indicate the residential experience is improving each year for students. The survey instrument is appended. (JAC)

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AN EVALUATION OF LIFE IN THE RESIDENCE HALLS AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY FROM AN ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE: 1984

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This report is the seventh in a series of studies that have examined life in the Indiana University residence halls using an ecosystem perspective. Studies have been conducted each Fall since 1978, and have attempted to ascertain how students perceive a series of issues related to residential living, including such matters as residence hall programs, staff responsiveness to student needs, student government, printed material and information, study conditions and order, and food service. While the information is helpful in determining how positively students perceive environment of the residence halls, it is probably more useful in providing suggestions and recommendations from students as to how to improve their environment.

The ecosystem approach to environmental assessment asks students not only to respond to a series of forced-choice items. It also asks students to identify issues about which they feel very strongly, in either a positive or negative sense, and to recommend steps that the university might take to enhance an already positive situation or rectify an unsatisfactory situation. Individual community councils and university officials in the various residence halls will address the results for the residence centers and make changes. As is the case with any study of perceptions, the results of the study can be affected by uncontrolled intervening variables (i.e. a negative incident receiving widespread publicity). To the best knowledge of the researchers, no such intervening variables affected this study.

This report presents an overview of life in the undergraduate residence halls. Further information is available upon request for the graduate living area.

This paper will report the results of the study conducted in 1984. It will also contrast the results of the 1984 study with the results of the studies conducted from 1978 through 1983.

Method

Sampling

The sample for this project was drawn on a systematic basis. Each center, with the exception of Collins Living Learning Center, drew a sample of 100 student participants. Due to its smaller size, 50 Collins residents were included in the sample. The students chosen to participate were identified by use of a roster of student residents. The total population of each center (except Collins) was divided by 100. The resulting quotient was the number used to identify students included in the sample. For example, in a center of 1100 students, the resulting quotient was 11. Thus, every 11th student listed on the roster was included in the sample. While this sampling method is not random, it was considered to be reasonably representative, since each living unit had a minimum of one student included in the sample. In nearly all cases, several students from each living unit were included in the sample.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this project was developed by the authors. It was based on the one that had been employed in previous assessment projects at Indiana University. Representatives from the Halls of Residence Department and the Residence Halls Association were invited to submit items for inclusion in the questionnaire, and they did so. Additionally, the community councils of the various residence centers were asked to submit not more than five items that addressed specific concerns of individual centers. The results to those items are not included in this study. Many of the centers submitted special questions, which often concerned such matters as programs unique to the centers or library usage. For the forced-choice items, a seven point Likert-type scale was used (7=very strongly agree, 1=very strongly disagree). A

unique feature of the instrument was the environmental referrent section. This section gave students the opportunity to go back through the questionnaire and identify not more than five items they felt very strongly about, in a positive or negative sense. They were asked to describe why they felt strongly about the items and then indicate how the issues addressed in the items could be enhanced. This method encourages students to become directly involved in the process of redesigning their environment to better meet their needs. A copy of the questionnaire is included as Appendix A.

Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed to the potential respondents through the resident assistant staff. The potential respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire and return them to a designated place in the center. All data were collected during the week of October 29 - November 2, 1984.

Data Analysis

Complete reports of the results were prepared using SPSS computer programs which yielded frequency distributions, modes, means, medians and histograms for each center as well as for the residence hall system. Moreover, means, medians and modes were computed for sub-groups within each center's sample along the following lines: the unit within which the students lived; their class standing; their sex; and whether or not they had lived in their present residence center prior to Fall, 1984. These additional data are especially useful in determining the impact of residential life for specific groups of students, such as sophomore women, freshmen men, or students who have lived in the residence hall in previous years.

Results

Of the 950 students included in the sample, 785 completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 82.63%. Reflecting the general residence hall population, the largest group of respondents by class was freshmen, followed by sophomores, juniors and seniors. A summary of the class standing of the respondents is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Class Standing of Respondents

Class Standing	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Freshman	411	52.4
Sophomore	222	28.3
Junior	85	10.8
Senior	61	7.8
Graduate	4	.5
No response	2	.2
Total	785	100.0

More women than men participated in this study, which reflects the fact that more women than men live in the residence halls. Over 59% of the participants were women, while the balance were men. The sex of the respondents is reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Sex of Respondents

Sex	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Female	468	59.6
Male	306	39.0
No response	11	1.4
Total	785	100.0

The largest percentage of respondents reported that they were living in their present residence hall for the first semester. Nearly 68% indicated that they were living in their residence center for the first semester, while the balance, excluding the non-respondents, had lived in the hall previously. A summary of these results are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

First Semester Lived in the Present Residence Center

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	533	67.9
No	242	30.8
No response	10	1.3
Total	785	100.0

Means, medians and standard deviations for each individual item are listed in Table 4. Most items elicited a mean score ranging from 4.00 to 6.00. Two (having the opportunity to study in alternative residence hall areas and the universal meal transfer program providing flexibility for students) had a mean score of over 6.00. One item, which dealt with food service, had a mean score below 4.00.

The results of the 1984 study are compared with those from previous years in Table 5. Eleven items had the highest mean score for the seven years the study has been conducted. For none of the items was the mean score for 1984 the lowest over the seven years of the study.

Discussion

By grouping the responses of several items into generic categories, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the results of the study. This next section will attempt to analyze the results according to the

following categories: programs, staff, student government, information and printed matter, order, and food service.

Residence Hall Programs

Programming issues included such items as satisfaction with social programs, guest speakers, recreational programs, cultural programs, faculty involvement, and health and wellness programs. The items which examined student responses to social programming in the unit as well as the center elicited the most favorable response for the seven years the study has been conducted. Likewise, the items which covered student satisfaction with cultural programs and guest speakers received the most favorable response from students over the past seven years. Recreational programming was evaluated very favorably (5.501) while faculty involvement with student received a barely favorable response (4.012). A new item added to this section this year, which examined programs offered by health and wellness education, received a moderately favorable response (4.345).

Residence Hall Staff

Resident Assistants and Halls of Residence personnel were evaluated in this cluster of items. Halls of Residence staff concerned with physical facilities received their highest response ever, while those who work at the main desk received a very positive response (5.300). Resident assistants were evaluated as being very available to help students (5.780) and very knowledgable about the services and resources available at the university (5.796). Students were asked if they knew about the special services that Foods Managers can provide, like special diets and social functions (4.219) and they reported on the help and courtesy extended to them by counter servers (4.952).

Student Government

Student government was evaluated according to three dimensions by the student respondents. RHA Student Services, which provides services including bunk bed, refrigerator and fan rental was evaluated very positively (5.152). The response of student government to student needs and the opportunities created by student government to participate in leadership positions also were evaluated positively by the students (4.486 and 4.956 respectively).

Information and Printed Materials

Two publications (The Key and The Ins and Outs) were evaluated positively by students. The mean response of the respondents to The Ins and Outs was the most positive ever (5.394) and The Key received a positive response (4.520) as a document which is a useful resource to students. Other informational items, including students' receiving adequate printed information describing the services and resources of their center and students knowing where to go to remedy problems were evaluated positively. Printed material received a mean response of 5.267 and students knowing where to go to resolve problems was evaluated at 4.934.

Study Conditions and Order

Several items dealt with student knowledge of policy and general safety, and study conditions.

The opportunity for students to study in their rooms received the second highest response in the history of the study (4.574) but the response itself is not as high as it might be. On the other hand, opportunity to study in alternative areas of the residence hall received its highest response ever (6.01, tie with 1983) with a median response of 6.273, meaning that half of the respondents evaluated the item over 6.273. Obviously, students are aware of alternative places to study.

Students reported feeling safe and secure in their residences (5.586), the second highest response for that item for the seven years of the study. The students indicated that they knew the rules of the residence center (5.593) which was a middle level response for that item over the course of this study.

Food Service

Two aspects of the new universal meal transfer program were evaluated by students. The first, that aspect of the program which enables students more freedom in choosing a dining hall for meals, received an enthusiastic response from students (6.004). The other aspect of the program, allowing students to participate in more meals, also was evaluated positively, receiving a mean score of 4.978. Obviously, the flexibility of this program is appreciated by students.

Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. Residence hall programs were evaluated very positively by students. Several of the items received the most positive response of the seven years of the study. Nevertheless, faculty involvement with students is an area that still needs improvement.

2. Residence hall staff, including a variety of individuals from several departments were evaluated very positively by the respondents. Custodial workers and resident assistants received very positive responses.

3. RHA Student Services appears to provide a highly regarded series of services to students. Responses to student needs were evaluated positively by students and they reported that they have an opportunity to participate in leadership positions, which is one of the purposes of having a student government.

4. Students indicated that they have adequate information about how to get things done in their residence center, and that the publications the university prepares meets their expressed purposes. This is particularly important in a large, complex institution like IUB. Clearly, students need this kind of assistance to accomplish tasks associated with a large, group living situation.

5. Study conditions need some improvement, although students reported that they know where alternative areas for study are located in the residence halls. In spite of several personal assaults at the beginning of the year, students reported that they feel safe and secure in the residence centers.

6. Responses to the new universal meal ticket program were very popular. In fact, the median response to the item concerning the meal program allowing for more freedom was the highest in the entire study.

Altogether, one can conclude that students living in the residence halls, or at least those who participated in this study, seem relatively pleased with their living experience and environment. While some aspects of it need improvement, and not every student was entirely satisfied with every aspect of the living environment it appears as though the residential experience is improving each year for students. Continual improvement is necessary if the university expects to attract and retain students to this largely residential community. Work in that direction will continue.

Table 4

Item By Item Responses

	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. The Ins and Outs (the student handbook), provides an adequate description of services, resources and regulations to students on campus.	5.565	5.394	1.159
2. There are adequate opportunities for social activities in my living unit (house, floor).	5.640	5.314	1.414
3. I am satisfied with the opportunities I have to hear guest speakers in my center.	4.319	4.396	1.581
4. The Halls of Residence staff are responsive to my needs concerning physical facilities.	5.078	4.907	1.533
5. I am able to study in my room when I wish to.	4.896	4.574	1.888
6. My resident assistant is available to meet my needs.	6.135	5.780	1.406
7. The Halls of Residence Office staff are responsive and helpful in providing main desk services.	5.592	5.300	1.430
8. Student government in my residence center offers me opportunities to participate in leadership positions.	4.953	4.956	1.413
9. I am satisfied with the opportunities I have to meet with faculty members in my residence center (outside of class).	4.038	4.012	1.488
10. My student government responds adequately to the needs expressed by residents of this center.	4.479	4.486	1.364
11. I have adequate opportunities to participate in recreational activities in my residence center.	5.712	5.501	1.246
12. I know the rules of my residence center.	5.833	5.593	1.284
13. There are adequate opportunities for cultural events in my center, i.e., music, arts, crafts.	4.388	4.378	1.513

Table 4 Con'd.

Item By Item Responses

	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
14. I have an opportunity to talk with someone in my center about personal concerns, such as homesickness or relationships.	5.004	4.921	1.629
15. There are adequate opportunities for social activities in my center.	5.542	5.317	1.351
16. The Key (Guide to Graduate Living in Eigenmann Center) is a useful resource to me as a student living in a residence hall.	4.330	4.520	1.407
17. The custodian in my living unit keeps the area clean.	6.351	5.882	1.455
18. I have an opportunity to study in alternative areas of the residence center, such as libraries or study halls.	6.273	6.071	1.191
19. I have received adequate printed information which describes the services and resources available to students in my center.	5.488	5.267	1.412
20. I feel safe and secure in my residence center.	5.851	5.586	1.355
21. The counter servers in my dining hall are helpful and courteous.	5.196	4.952	1.574
22. I look forward to meal time in my dining hall.	3.714	3.578	1.765
23. When I have a problem in my center, I am aware of the person(s) to contact to remedy the situation.	5.068	4.934	1.482
24. The Universal Meal Transfer system enables me to have more freedom in choosing a dining room for my meals.	6.519	6.004	1.246
25. There are adequate personal development activities available in my center.	4.365	4.494	1.289
26. I am aware of the help my Foods Manager can provide in planning social functions for residents as well as special diets and sick trays.	4.261	4.219	1.742

Table 4 Con'd.

Item By Item Responses

	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
27. My RA is knowledgable about the services and resources available at IU.	6.094	5.796	1.294
28. I believe the health-related programs presented in the residence halls by Health and Wellness Education add to my overall educational experience.	4.229	4.345	1.368
29. The Universal Meal Transfer system has enabled me to participate in more meals because of the convenience of eating in any dining hall.	4.887	4.978	1.604
30. I am satisfied with the services of RHA Student Services, like bunk beds, refrigerators, and fans.	5.317	5.152	1.535

Table 5

Mean Scores for the 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984 Surveys

	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1978	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1979	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1980	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1981	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1982	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1983	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1984
1. The "Ins and Outs," distributed at registration, provides an adequate description of services and resources to students on campus.	*	5.03	5.04	5.17	5.13	5.12	5.394
2. There are adequate opportunities for social activities in my living unit (house, floor, hall).	4.92	5.16	5.24	5.21	4.96	5.15	5.314
3. Interesting, informative guest speakers make presentations in my center.	2.30	3.04	3.22	3.71	3.97	4.32	4.396
4. The Halls of Residence staff are responsive to my needs concerning physical facilities.	4.59	4.52	4.80	4.85	4.74	4.67	4.907
5. The Halls of Residence Office staff are responsive and helpful in providing main desk services.	6.02	5.26	5.31	5.15	5.20	5.19	5.30
6. I am able to study in my room when I wish to.	4.20	4.46	4.53	4.61	4.45	4.54	4.574
7. The resident assistants (resident fellows in Collins) in my center are available to meet my needs.	5.19	5.62	5.53	5.80	5.66	5.68	5.780
8. I have adequate opportunities to participate in recreational programs offered through my residence center.	5.33	5.66	5.55	5.40	5.35	5.59	5.501
9. Student government in my residence center offers me opportunities to participate in leadership positions.	4.32	5.08	4.97	4.87	4.77	4.79	4.956

Table 5 Con'd.

Mean Scores for the 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984 Surveys

	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1978	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1979	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1980	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1981	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1982	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1983	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1984
10. I am satisfied with the opportunities I have to meet with faculty members in my residence center.	3.41	3.90	3.91	4.09	3.91	4.11	4.012
11. I know the rules of my residence center.	5.19	5.56	5.36	5.42	5.65	5.58	5.593
12. The opportunity for cultural events in my center, i.e., concerts, arts and crafts, meets my needs.	3.68	3.98	4.24	4.23	4.08	4.25	4.378
13. I have an opportunity to talk with someone in my center about personal problems, such as home-sickness, relationships, or academics.	4.40	4.87	4.98	4.95	4.82	4.70	4.921
14. I have an opportunity to study in alternative areas of the residence center, such as libraries or study halls.	*	5.92	5.99	5.95	5.98	6.01	6.017
15. There are adequate opportunities for social activities in my center.	4.81	5.11	5.09	5.09	5.03	5.14	5.317
16. The Key does a good job of describing residence hall living at Indiana University.	4.68	4.96	4.66	4.37	4.74	4.72	4.52
17. The custodian in my living unit keeps the area clean.	5.51	5.87	5.74	5.79	5.72	5.68	5.882
18. I have received adequate printed information which describes the services and resources available to students in my center.	4.71	5.12	4.93	5.28	5.10	5.15	5.267

Table 5 Con'd.

Mean Scores for the 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984 Surveys

	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1978	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1979	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1980	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1981	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1982	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1983	$\bar{X}$ Fall 1984
19. I feel safe and secure in my residence center.	5.30	5.33	5.27	5.58	5.32	5.47	5.586
20. I am aware of personal development activities such as assertiveness and leadership workshops being offered in my center.	*	3.76	3.58	3.93	3.93	4.00	4.494
21. When I have a problem in my center I am aware of the procedures to follow to remedy the situation.	*	4.54	4.56	4.63	4.90	4.70	4.934

* Did not appear in the 1978 questionnaire
1 = Very Strongly Disagree
7 = Very Strongly Agree

APPENDIX

PART I

Listed below are a series of statements. Please read them and on the continuum to the right of each statement, indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with it by placing an X in the appropriate blank.

The following definitions of terms may be useful to you:

Resident Assistant (Resident Fellow in LLC): This person is an upperclass or graduate student who is assigned to a floor or house and is responsible for interpersonal, social, and academic experiences of students.

Residence Life Staff: Includes Resident Assistants (Resident Fellows) and Residence Life Coordinators.

Halls of Residence Staff: Includes the Housing Manager, custodial and clerical staff.

Food Service Staff: Foods Manager, Assistant Managers, and staff.

Residence Halls Association (RHA): Includes all student government positions in undergraduate residence halls.

	Very Strongly Agree (7)						Very Strongly Disagree (1)
1. The Ins and Outs (the student handbook), provides an adequate description of services, resources and regulations to students on campus.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
2. There are adequate opportunities for social activities in my living unit (house, floor).	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
3. I am satisfied with the opportunities I have to hear guest speakers in my center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
4. The Halls of Residence staff are responsive to my needs concerning physical facilities.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
5. I am able to study in my room when I wish to.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
6. My resident assistant is available to meet my needs.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
7. The Halls of Residence Office staff are responsive and helpful in providing main desk services.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
8. Student government in my residence center offers me opportunities to participate in leadership positions.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
9. I am satisfied with the opportunities I have to meet with faculty members in my residence center (outside of class).	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
10. My student government responds adequately to the needs expressed by residents of this center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
11. I have adequate opportunities to participate in recreational activities in my residence center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
12. I know the rules of my residence center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
13. There are adequate opportunities for cultural events in my center, i.e., music, arts, crafts.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
14. I have an opportunity to talk with someone in my center about personal concerns, such as homesickness or relationships.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/

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	Very Strongly Agree (7)						Very Strongly Disagree (1)
15. There are adequate opportunities for social activities in my center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
16. The Key (Guide to Graduate Living in Eigenmann Center) is a useful resource to me as a student living in a residence hall.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
17. The custodian in my living unit keeps the area clean.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
18. I have an opportunity to study in alternative areas of the residence center, such as libraries or study halls.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
19. I have received adequate printed information which describes the services and resources available to students in my center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
20. I feel safe and secure in my residence center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
21. The counter servers in my dining hall are helpful and courteous.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
22. I look forward to meal time in my dining hall.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
23. When I have a problem in my center, I am aware of the person(s) to contact to remedy the situation.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
24. The Universal Meal Transfer system enables me to have more freedom in choosing a dining room for my meals.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
25. There are adequate personal development activities available in my center.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
26. I am aware of the help my Foods Manager can provide in planning social functions for residents as well as special diets and sick trays.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
27. My RA is knowledgable about the services and resources available at IU.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
28. I believe the health-related programs presented in the residence halls by Health and Wellness Education add to my overall educational experience.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
29. The Universal Meal Transfer system has enabled me to participate in more meals because of the convenience of eating in any dining hall.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/
30. I am satisfied with the services of RHA Student Services, like bunk beds, refrigerators, and fans.	___/	___/	___/	____/	___/	___/	___/

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PART II

Now that you have completed Part I, go back through the items and identify not more than five items that you feel very strongly about, in either a positive or negative sense. Write the number of those items in the blocks provided below. Then, next to the item number, write why you feel strongly about the item, and what you would recommend to improve the situation.

ITEM NUMBER	WHY DO YOU FEEL STRONGLY ABOUT THE ITEM	WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION

Thank you for your help with this project.

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